Go ahead, tell ’em what you really think

By Sally McKenzie, CEO McKenzie Management

“It all comes down to communication.” Those immortal words have been used to describe success or failure in business, on the playing field and the battlefield, in the classroom, the treatment room and virtually every other environment in which information must be effectively conveyed from one person to another to ensure a desired outcome.

In the dental practice, your communication with staff and patients has a profound and powerful impact on whether you struggle or sail through your days.

Consider the case of “Dr. Roberson.” He is a truly gifted clinician. His patients are tremendously fortunate yet, I suspect few have any real understanding of the talent this practitioner brings to the profession of dentistry. His employees, tragically, do not understand Dr. Roberson. Few have lasted more than a year.

He doesn’t have a “team” because the non-stop turnover in the office never allows a team to take shape. Thus, Dr. Roberson has employees, mostly temporary ones. He does not understand how other practitioners can keep staff, sometimes for years, and he is on a seemingly perpetual quest to secure just one good worker who will not “find a better opportunity” within months.

In Dr. Roberson’s mind, perfection is a “must.” He learned long ago that it is important to give feedback to employees the moment he sees them doing something incorrectly. Thus, as soon as he witnesses an employee performing a task that is not the way he would perform it, he gives immediate feedback. The scenario typically unfolds something like this:

Nicole is setting up instruments when Dr. Roberson walks in.

“What are you doing?” Dr. Roberson says. He doesn’t realize that his query has put Nicole on the defensive. She can sense that Dr. Roberson is upset.

“I’m preparing instrument set ups, doctor. Is there something else you would like me to do?”

“Why are you doing it like that? They should be set up this way.” Then he brusquely shows her how to do it, and whisks out of the room without another word.

Unfortunately, Dr. Roberson has no regard for the impact of his communication. His intention is to set the employee straight on how he thinks the task, no matter how trivial, should be done.

He believes that because his intentions are pure — he must ensure that things are done “just right” in his practice — it’s not important how the message is communicated. Instead, he has totally disregarded one of the most critical facts for effective communication:

How you say it has far more weight than the actual words you use. In fact, words alone are only 7 percent of the message you convey. Tone, attitude, body language and facial expression have a far greater impact on whether the recipient of your message actually receives it or shuts it out because your delivery of that message made him or her angry, upset or uncomfortable.

Dr. Roberson is not only impatient, he is also very direct. He has patients to see and doesn’t have time to beat around the bush. As a result, what he believes is edifying feedback comes across as agitated criticism, which in truth is neither helpful nor constructive.

Sadly, because Dr. Roberson is a boss whom his employees fear, no one is giving him feedback regarding his communication style. Thus, until he seeks to understand why his practice appears to have a revolving door, his productivity will continue...
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Conversely, Dr. Berenson’s practice is lined with mediocre performers, most of who are convinced they are the “American Idol Superstars” of the dental team. Dr. Berenson has made these “superstars” herself.

If there are issues or concerns with an employee, Dr. Berenson gives a little hint here and there that maybe a few things could quite possibly be ever so slightly improved. All the while, she is extra careful not to be too specific about anything so as not to offend the staff member who just might get mad and — heaven forbid — walk out.

The employees all go along assuming everything is fine and believing they are effective and contributing members of the team. Meanwhile, Dr. Berenson is convinced that if she keeps dropping hints, the staff will figure it out and take steps to improve their performance.

Nothing ever changes, except the percentage of lost revenues, which only increases. In reality, hints and subtle clues are not feedback any employee is likely to act upon.

Turn feedback into profits

It is the interesting irony of many dental practices that employees do not give each other feedback because they fear they will cause conflict. They don’t communicate frustrations or irritations because they want to go along to get along. This is the double-edged sword of politeness.

Employees who are overly polite to the point where they will not address issues that need to be dealt with are, in actuality, being dishonest. They are engaging in destructive passive-aggressive behaviors that create conflict.

A system of effective feedback is much like a system of proper oral health care. Specific steps must be taken daily to ensure the health and vitality of the group. For example, verbal feedback can be given at any time, but it is most effective at the moment the employee is engaging in the behavior that you either want to praise or correct.

If “Abby” at the front desk managed to expertly convince the difficult “Mr. Denney” to keep the crown appointment that he wanted to cancel at the last minute, tell her; and do so publicly. Similarly, if her handling of a situation is not consistent with practice goals and objectives, explain to her constructively how you would like for her to address similar situations in the future, but do so privately. Positive feedback and pats on the back should be given publicly. Constructive criticism should be given privately.

Choosing to avoid opportunities to give employees feedback is like choosing to help them to fail. That being said, this street runs both ways and employees must be willing to accept feedback and take action on it. In reality, if employees are open to it, feedback is all around them from colleagues and patients. The key is to take the feedback and turn it into positive action.

Consider how you respond to suggestions and comments from those around you. Are you defensive? Do you take it as a personal affront? Are your feelings hurt or do you become angry when someone recommends doing something a different way? Do you dismiss feedback because you don’t like the person giving it? Instead, separate yourself from the action and look at feedback as an objective view of a particular task or procedure and, most importantly, as one of the most essential tools you can use to excel.

The best way to become comfortable in receiving and acting on feedback is to ask for it. We are incapable of seeing ourselves as others see us, which is why being open to feedback is essential in achieving our greatest potential. When receiving feedback, make a conscious decision to listen carefully to what the person is saying and control your desire to respond.

In other words, resist the urge to kill the messenger. Ask questions to better understand the specifics of the person’s feedback. If the individual giving the feedback is angry, ask him or her if you can discuss the problem when you are both calmer and can avoid responding emotionally.
Thank the person for trying to help you improve, even if you didn’t particularly care for what he or she told you. Resist the urge to blow off those comments you considered to be negative. Over the next 48 hours, think about the information you have been given and devise three to five steps you can take to change your approach.

For example, Dental Assistant Laura is very frustrated because she feels that Business Employee Betsy is unnecessarily interrupting the clinical team when they are with patients. Betsy feels that Laura is trivializing her need for clear information.

Instead of lashing out, Betsy decides to ask for examples and listens to Laura’s perception of the interruptions. She thanks Laura for calling her attention to the issue and decides to focus on addressing the matter constructively rather than reacting negatively to what she could choose to interpret as unjust criticism.

Betsy develops a plan to raise the issue at the next staff meeting. She is prepared to share with the team situations in which she has felt the matter necessitated an interruption and would like guidance on how to handle similar situations in the future.

Don’t sit back and wait for feedback, actively solicit it and use it! Recognize that feedback is one of the most critical tools you have in achieving your full professional potential.

Constructive feedback – not criticism – should be given and received daily to help all members of the dental team continuously fine tune and improve the manner in which everyone carries out their responsibilities.

About the author

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